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The Vitality of Tradition

A small community must evolve naturally. Whether it is secluded because it is in a rural location, or because it has an ancient history, smaller communities run at a slower pace and develop traditions and cultures completely unique to their locations and nationalities. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist and author, changed her life forever when she chose to travel to the village of “Ballybran,” Ireland. In an attempt to discover the source of trending mental illness in rural Ireland, namely schizophrenia, she left in her wake fury and discontentedness after deceiving the townsfolk and immortalizing their darkest secrets by publishing the work *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*. It is not only anthropologists who are able to objectively analyze a culture enough to shed deep meaning on a community’s inner workings. Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese-American author, tells the alleged story of her estranged aunt, whose pregnancy after her husband leaves the country proves to be fatal in a small village in 1920’s China. It is not clear whether the adultery was consensual because Kingston’s aunt commits suicide in “No Name Woman” in order to prevent a terrible life for herself and her child. Though spread apart by several decades and thousands of miles, both of the small communities that Scheper-Hughes and Kingston describe shed light on ancient tradition in an almost entirely modern world. Through these readings, it is apparent that influence from outside sources is damaging. Outside influences can also lead to unbalanced gender populations by drawing away a gender group through promises of wealth and work. This discontinuity tends to create suffocating familial relationships in an attempt to maintain togetherness in the community. Secrecy becomes vital to maintaining the integrity of the community, and familial closeness, although potentially harmful, is also used to protect the members of the community from outside sources. If the modern world does not try to understand how small communities work, stigma surrounding the practices and close-mindedness in these small communities will continue to grow and cause harm to unwitting citizens.

Before one can understand the negative influences of outsiders on a small community, one must first observe that the small community functioned copasetically before such influences come in to play. Robert Bellah, a sociologist, lends his analytical expertise on the motives and characteristics of successful communities and their members. He describes the two personalities that can define a community, “the classical civic contrast between the private person who thinks first of himself alone and the citizen who knows himself to be a participant in a form of life through which his own identity is fulfilled” (Bellah 72). Bellah’s careful use of the words “private” versus “citizen” illustrates his case further; to be a citizen is to belong to a community, while a private person does not seek to belong. He also points out that a citizen is aware of his “participation” in the community. Through this awareness, a citizen knows his identity. This is how the people of Ballybran lived before Scheper-Hughes arrived. Not one person doubted their role in the community. But Scheper-Hughes points out that after she wrote her book, the villagers of Ballybran, “lost a hitherto unchallenged native interpretation of the meaning of their lives as ones based on the implicitly cherished values of familistic loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice” (578). A community’s way of life may be questioned by visitors but the “native interpretation” would not change because this is how a community functions and how they view themselves as a part of the world. One can learn about all the places and cultures of the world in a classroom, but only ones’ community teaches what it means to be a human in the world and in a society. The Irish villagers had this innate core of their society criticized to derision by an outsider who claimed to be professional, and yet naive to the negative implications of her publication. The villagers had their own understanding of their way of life and their identities as citizens in a community. After the arrival of an outsider, their existence and how they identified themselves as human beings were altered and therefore the community’s previous values of togetherness and loyalty were damaged.

Negative outside influences not only directly affect people in small communities, but they can also influence citizens to leave, to desire that which is not in their everyday lives already. Kingston notes that among her grandfather and uncles, and all men in the village, “[t]hose lucky enough to get contracts waved goodbye from the decks” (323). The lure of work opportunities on foreign soil drove the men from the Chinese village leaving the women to maintain an entire community -all the work in the houses and on the fields, the caring of children and elders, and the protection of everyone from crime and violence - mostly on their own. Any men who were left behind in the village had complete power over the remaining citizens, causing the women to become prey to the men’s commands. The repercussions of this may have led to unspoken violence against women. Kingston’s aunt’s pregnancy may have been the result of such violence. In the case of Ballybran, the younger generations were lured away rather than the elder men. While using specialized testing on young adults to determine underlying psychological reactions to symbolic pictures, Scheper-Hughes discovered that “all but three of the twenty-two young girls tested expected to leave the village within the next few years in order to pursue a nursing or teaching career or to work abroad” (587). Once again, the promise of work and money motivated the young women to leave the village. In this case, a decreased female population made it difficult for the villagers to continue to raise families. The young men were left to farm as the women went away to embrace different lifestyles. Without women, fewer children can continue to populate the village and this can ultimately destroy a community. But, more importantly, without women, the men are left behind to wonder why their lifestyle is not appealing to the girls in their generation. This is how the men learn to become insecure and untrusting of outsiders because they cannot keep the native women in the community. In both the situations described by Kingston and Scheper-Hughes, an unbalanced gender population proves to be a detriment to the community. If outside influences did not lure away one particular gender, there would have been more variety to keep the villages thriving and safe.

Despite outside influence, these small communities do defend themselves to maintain the integrity of their lifestyle. They defend their way of life by lying or misleading outsiders to prevent judgment on their community. Kingston paints a stern portrait of Chinese traditions by stating, “[t]he emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names” (325). Kingston later describes how Chinese people revere their first name. They change their name when their lives change dramatically and their original name is kept as a secret, a memory. This shows that even when it comes to religion, the Chinese culture maintained secrecy in order to protect their identities and their pasts. This relates to Scheper-Hughes examination of the Irish countryman and his tendency to lie. After her time in the village, she was able to interpret people’s behavior, and she believed she could pick up on the lies she was told. Though her findings are only attributed to speculation, she began, “analyzing the values of villagers as demonstrated by what they want to believe about themselves; what they want me to believe about them; and what they think I want to believe about them” (Scheper-Hughes 593). Scheper-Hughes believes she can understand the values of the villagers and, at the same time, proclaims that the villagers lie in order to make her believe certain things. We cannot know to what extent the Irish people manipulated Scheper-Hughes, but it becomes apparent that, even though she endeavored to fish out lies, the Irish did trick her in order to keep some parts of their lives secret. Although she managed to publish some of their secrets, she was misled enough to come to inaccurate conclusions about the community. For example, she accused the Ballybran villagers of incest because the love and devotion between Irish siblings was not something an American anthropologist could understand. However, in many respects, the villagers were able to successfully protect themselves against her prying and deceptive mind. Just as in the Chinese village Kingston describes, trickery proves to be beneficial in maintaining secrets in order to protect the villager’s lifestyles from further judgment and misinterpretation.

The closeness of a small community, particularly among families, also influences villagers from changing their lifestyle. Their intense closeness though, can cause harm to individuals who try to defy tradition or challenge the community’s standards. Kingston describes an example of families protecting each other stating, “[p]arents researched birth charts probably not so much to assure good fortune as to circumvent incest in a population that has but one hundred surnames” (330). Here, Kingston reveals a unique custom that shows the close-knit and conscientious nature of this village. For the safety of future generations and to maintain variety and propriety by preventing incest, the Chinese village proved a love and dedication exemplary to all communities. Prevalent in smaller communities are a group of elders or adults who make executive decisions about activities and choices presented in the community. Choices must be made in order to keep the community and its citizens safe. Villagers make up the whole of the community so they must be able to see how their actions affect the safety of others. While the adults go to great lengths to protect their children, they must also be willing to punish their children when the boundaries that protect the village are crossed. Kingston describes a negative effect of this closeness when she relates how her aunt defied the community standards by becoming pregnant by someone other than her husband. As a result, the villagers raided her house and destroyed her clothes and livestock. These actions ultimately drove Kingston’s aunt to suicide because raising an illegitimate child would have been fatally dangerous for her and the child. Kingston describes, “even though we had not locked our doors against them…They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had split, splattering the red arcs about her” (324). The key to this gruesome picture is that, even though the villagers were coming to harm and intimidate Kingston’s aunt’s family because of her disgraceful betrayal, they did not lock their doors to protect themselves, almost as if they believed they deserved the punishment. Although it was the standards of the community that caused this harsh punishment, one cannot neglect to recognize the extent to which the village also protects its villagers because it is their devotion to the community that drove the villagers to violence.

Consensual or not, every small community comes across outside influences than can ultimately change the community or encourage the community to hold to their traditions even more strongly. Smaller communities have more integrity than suburbs and cities because of their steadfast dedication to their native lifestyles. Villages evolve slowly over time, adapting to the changes of the world and occasional intrusions from outside that cause negative effects for the community. Nonetheless, these outside influences cannot be foreseen or entirely prevented despite a community’s vitality. When a village stands the test of time, it proves the unwavering success of their traditions and the strength it takes to resist the kinds of threats that destroy communities. Whether in China or Ireland, small communities have the strength to withstand revolutionary individuals or dangerous social situations in order to maintain tradition.

Works Cited

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